

BLESSINGS GIVEN FOR GREEN CEMETERY, ORGANIC FIELDS

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Abbot Robert Barnes (left) walks with Michael Hobert, chairman of the Clarke County board of supervisors, as they make their way to the blessing of the fields at Holy Cross Abbey in Clarke County on Wednesday. A service was held for the blessing of the fields and the abbey's Cool Spring Natural Cemetery. (Photo by Ginger Perry/The Winchester Star)



U.S. Congressman Frank Wolf, R-10th, attended the consecration of Cool Spring Natural Cemetery.

BERRYVILLE — The sun shone down, illuminating autumn leaves Wednesday morning as monks bestowed blessings on two new features on the grounds of Berryville's Holy Cross Abbey.

Abbot Robert Barnes led the blessings of a new natural cemetery and organic farming fields at the Abbey, located east of town near the Shenandoah River.

Ed Leonard, the monastery's chief sustainability officer for the past two years, said the projects are part of the effort to increase its sustainability, both economically and environmentally.

The Cool Spring Natural Cemetery sits on approximately 55 acres — 25 wooded acres, 25 meadow acres and five for scattering ashes — on the monastery's 1,200 acres and is one of two

“green” cemeteries in the state. Leonard described the natural cemetery as a “back to the future” concept that inters the deceased in the same manner that their ancestors may have been laid to rest.

While those buried at the cemetery must be covered, metal caskets and embalming procedures are prohibited. Caskets can be made of wood or other biodegradable materials.

“There are no vaults in the ground, there are no marble headstones. It’s really about getting back to the natural rhythm of life,” Leonard said. “One big benefit is it’s half the cost of a normal funeral. In terms of [the environment], a body is going back to the ground and the ground naturally reclaims it. There’s no metal that’s going to be in the ground so we’re saving resources, no chemicals from embalming.

“We think, just from a societal standpoint, it’s really just the right way to do things,” he added.

While there have been some interments, Leonard declined to comment on how many people have been laid to rest in the natural cemetery.

Barnes, who has been the abbot for 14 years, said the 13 monks at the monastery have been interested in increasing its environmental sustainability for some time.

“As monks, we’re very attached to the land,” he said. “We support ourselves as far as you can in today’s world. It’s the idea to really care for the land — not just use it, not just exploit it — but to benefit it.”

As part of an effort to preserve the monastery’s land, the monks have worked with Clarke County’s government to place a conservation easement on the property, meaning the land will be protected from most industrial and residential development in perpetuity, said Michael Hobert, chairman of the Clarke County Board of Supervisors.

“We’ve supported the green cemetery in the sense that our staff worked with the monks as they began planning to find out about the legalities and what is required,” Hobert said.

“It was something we also supported because we want the monastery to be a sustainable institution. They have open space here, we have worked with them previously to place a substantial portion of their property under a conservation easement.”

Rep. Frank Wolf, R-10th, was contacted by the monastery about a year ago regarding the monks’ efforts to produce sustainable agriculture. Wolf helped form an arrangement that allows the monks to sell as much of their excess harvest as they want to the National Conference Center in Leesburg.

“That’s what really brought us up here,” Wolf said. “Plus, I love to stop [at the monastery]. I stop here periodically and buy books.”

Kate Zurschmeide and her family have been running Great Country Farms, one of the monastery's neighbors, for 19 years. This year, the Zurschmeides reached an agreement with the monks to farm fruits and vegetables on part of the monastery's land.

"We're farming 110 acres this year [and] we're going to expand that, probably double it next year. We've done an arrangement of a lease of that land so that [the monks] generate revenue from that," Zurschmeide said.

"And the ground here is just phenomenal. It hasn't been tilled in so many years, and so the richness of the soil and what it has to be imparting to the food that's grown here really is wonderful."

Barnes believes both the cemetery and organic farm fields are natural extensions of the monks' way of life that can benefit both the monastery and the community.

"It's a way of connecting with our neighbors and friends in the county, being responsible stewards of the land and [setting] a good example," Barnes said.

Additional information on the cemetery is available online at coolspringnaturalcemetery.org.